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ABSTRACT

This essay explains two ways in which "the rural" serves as context. The common way interprets the rural lifeworld as an impediment to certain projects and goals, thus framing "the rural" as a subjugated and diminished reality. The other way is called "the rural circumstance" in order to situate the rural lifeworld as a center of attention, not as something to get rid of. This focus reverses the implied agency so that cultivation of the purposes and commitments of such a lifeworld becomes the object of care. The argument draws on the work of Raymond Williams and Jurgen Habermas. Habermas proposes that institutions of capital "suck meaning" from the lifeworld--actual life-spaces of people, rural and otherwise. For Williams, it is essential for those who care about rural places to imagine decent rural futures for them, i.e., to reconstruct and fashion new "rural" meanings. These decent futures would diverge sharply from those imagined from the cosmopolitan perspectives that dominate global firms, universities, and agencies of national will. Such decent futures would reflect a sensibility of place and community, but also struggle for economic justice and the common good. This essay contrasts some educational purposes that come from rural lifeworlds with those that are purveyed in rural schools from the cosmopolitan center, and addresses the issue of what might be "properly" rural. The question, however, is slippery. To imagine "rural" rural futures, it is important to consider many competing answers to the question, "What is properly rural?" (Contains 16 references.) (Author/SV)

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Rural as Context

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Abstract

This essay explains two ways in which "the rural" serves as context. The common way interprets the rural lifeworld as an impediment to certain projects and goals. In this way, it frames "the rural" as a subjugated and diminished reality. We call the other way "the rural circumstance" in order to situate the rural lifeworld as a center of attention, not as something to be got rid of. This centering of attention reverses the implied agency, of course, so that cultivation of the purposes and commitments of such a lifeworld, or such lifeworlds, become the object of care. The argument draws on the work of both Raymond Williams and Jurgen Habermas.

Habermas proposes that the institutions of capital "suck meaning" from the lifeworld, actual life-spaces of people, rural and otherwise. For Williams, it is essential for those who care about rural places to imagine decent rural futures for them--in other words to reconstruct and fashion new *rural* meanings. These decent futures would diverge sharply from those imagined from the cosmopolitan perspectives that dominate global firms, universities, and agencies of national will. In short, such decent futures would reflect a sensibility of place and community, but also struggle for economic justice and the common good.

The essay contrasts some of the educational purposes that come from rural lifeworlds with those that are purveyed in rural schools from the cosmopolitan center, and the authors address the issue of what might be "properly" rural. The question, however, is slippery and readers are advised to think for themselves. If we are to imagine *rural* rural futures, it will be important to consider many competing answers to the question "What is properly rural?"

Rural as Context

"The Rural" serves as context in two senses. We will, predictably, dismiss one as most common and privilege the uncommon second sense. In the case of "rural as context," we thus counsel our colleagues to sidestep common sense in order to change it.

Two Usages of Rural

First, "the rural" serves as the surrounding of something else, something, that is, regarded as far more important. "The rural" in this sense of context is a rhetorically *subjugated* and *diminished* rural. This is the most common usage, in which the rural is regarded as not very interesting nor is it taken very seriously by anyone. It exists, in other words, to be got out of the way.

In the other, less common, usage, it is also a subjugated and diminished rural, but this time the subjugation and diminution is understood and opposed. Moreover, this subjugation and diminution is a *material* condition rather than simply a rhetorical servitude to whatever, under the more common usage, is viewed as logically and teleologically prior. Let us say what we mean at the start: the rural lifeworld is in very many ways the thrall of purposes deployed and enacted by capitalist economic structures. Farming, forestry, mining, manufacturing, burger-pushing: these are the structures, and in whose hands are the means of production? Before you answer too quickly, you need to realize that land ownership in the US is more concentrated than

it was in Cuba in 1959 (Davidson, 1996, p. 35). "Archer-Daniels-Midland, supermarket to the world," as those whom Raymond Williams called the "godfathers" announce on PBS: What do you suppose that jingoistic jingle means for the rural lifeworld? Something really good, you think?

Rural as the Rhetoric of Deficit and Impediment

Schoolteachers and administrators, as well as fellow educationists--and by "educationists" we mean scribblers on generic schooling and foisters of "policy" on all places alike, as well as ourselves--usually understand rural as context in the first sense. We wrote "usual y" to be polite, but that won't do. Rural as context in the more common usage is *practically always* regarded as an *impediment*: an impediment to school effectiveness, school excellence, systemic reform, economic development, and global economic dominion among other aims. One of us just attended a faculty meeting in a rural school high school where global economic dominion was indeed given as the reason for creating better instruction in math and science.

Among *progressives* or *liberals* who hold this sort of context in mind, however, the judgment about rural context is more pathetically misguided. Among them, the rural is emblematic of the most entrenched status quo and therefore in itself an impediment to social justice. Don't those hicks fear Blacks (or Jews or Mexicans or people from the next town or their own shadows)? Aren't local political machines in some of those places famously vicious? Don't we need to destroy most of those places in order to save them? Despite the fact that, yes, we have a centuries-old tradition of destroying these places in order to save them, insights about fear

and loathing as peculiarly rustic manifestations of evil strike us as suspiciously convenient. If the rural is passe, these claims offer easy hope for social justice. The claims, however, dramatically misunderstand the human condition. The struggle for a more just world is not only the prerogative of the global cultural elite in world-class cities or universities. How can it be? Rural places, moreover, will continue to exist so long as the world is to remain habitable, which means we had better start imagining decent rural futures instead of relegating the rural context to a sentimentalized and disparaged past.

Rural as Material Condition

The first, more common, sense of "the rural" presents a depressing enough misconception. However, we can count on the 10 fingers our educationist colleagues who understand the rural context in the second sense (we'd have to use toes if we included practicing teachers and administrators).

Not all of them would be living colleagues. The one educationist who best understood "the rural" as contextual in the second sense--which, please observe, is hardly contextual at all since it shifts the rural from peripheral to central attention--was the aforementioned Raymond Williams. He is among those no longer with us, incidentally.

Raymond Williams

Williams has been described variously as an adult educator and a communist. He is a culturalist more than a structuralist, however, and is no vulgar Marxist. He taught, after all, somehow under the Cambridge University umbrella even though he was a poor rustic from

Wales--land, you know, of the barbarians, speaking and obstinately valuing an outlandish and outmoded tongue.

Williams' seminal works about "the rural" are *The Country and The City* (1973) and *The Politics of Modernism* (1989). They are practically unknown to North American educationists of our acquaintance; they remain uncited even by those few writers on rural education who keenly appreciate the second sense of rural context. The urban studies people, however, do know these works, and our 19-year old daughter reported that *The Country and the City* appeared on the reading list for a course she took.

Williams himself claimed it was a very difficult work. Well, it's not so difficult, at least for someone grounded in both Marxism and literature, because Williams understands rural culture and history as influenced by (a) class struggle which is (b) manifest in literature. Now you know why Williams remains and will probably remain unknown and unheeded by educationists. Whether the cause is material or rhetorical, we cannot say. A little of both, no doubt, but since we in North America--or shall I rather say the United State (singular) of NAFTA?--discount the significance of classes, let alone contest among them, and since in the US we have successfully discarded a devotion to literature that regards it as having *practical value*. Talk about depressing!

A single quote, we hope, may serve to pique your interest in Williams. The reference to Phillip Sidney, a Renaissance poet, means simply that Sidney's poem "Arcadia" spawned the term "Arcadian," which means "rural idyll." Williams's most important message here is that "the rural" is *not* an idyll; a position that goes some distance in deflecting the charge that any concern for "the rural" in this sense marks one as a hopeless romantic.

> Poets have often lent their tongues to princes, who are in a position to pay or to reply. What as been lent to shepherds, and at what rates of interest, is much more in question. It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral, was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants. The elegant game was then only at arm's length--a rough arm's length--from a visible reality of country life. (Williams, 1973, p. 22)

This passage should have much to interest poets who too often find their tongues in princes' mouths, a fate for which the profession of "educationist" puts many of our colleagues at extreme risk. We all, however, experience a degree of risk since we work for universities, government agencies or contractors, and since we all have opened our brains to some extent for inscription with professional norms.

Our account of rural context--with a focus of course on the second sense--rises from our own participation in rural life, but also builds on the importance Jürgen Habermas (1984) accords "the life world." We therefore locate what is rural in the meaningfulness of that world. What is the rural lifeworld? What are these meanings? What *is* rural, properly speaking? Let Williams put you in the mood:

> Thus at once, for me, before the argument starts, coūntry life has many meanings. It is the elms, the may, the white horse, in the field beyond the window where I am writing. It is the men in the November evening, walking back from pruning, with their hands in he pockets of their khaki coats; and the women in headscarves, outside their cottages,

> waiting for the blue bus that will take them, inside school hours, to work in the harvest. It is the tractor on the road, leaving its tracks of serrated pressed mud; the light in the small hours, in the pig-farm across the road, in the crisis of a litter; the slow brown van met at the difficult corner, with the crowded sheep jammed to its slatted sides; the heavy smell, on still evenings, of the silage ricks fed with molasses. It is also the sour land, on the thick boulder clay, not far up the road, that is selling for housing, for a speculative development, at twelve thousand pounds an acre [i.e., $20K in 1973, roughly $60K in constant 1999 dollars].... In the field with the elms and the white horse, behind my own present home, there are faint marks of a ninth-century road, that resists the posts being driven, today, for a new wire fence. This country life then has many meanings: in feeling and activity; in region and in time. The cobbles under the field are older than the university to which the bridletrack leads, five miles under thin thorn hedges, across the open and windy fields, past Starvegoose Wood. The foot of earth over them is a millennium. (Williams, 1973, pp. 3-4)

The Rural Lifeworld as Context

In order to avoid the phrase "the rural context," and in order to avoid the awkwardness and inarticulate singularity of "the rural," we use the expression "the rural circumstance." Contextual descriptions usually consist of demographic details, which, though important, say much more about the institutions defining and measuring a population than they do about the population. And the individual or even the group features of a population say surprisingly little about the situatedness--the circumstance--of the population. In other words, a strictly

demographic approach to context *is designed* to reinforce placelessness and deracination.

The lifeworld is necessarily a situated experience. No one actually lives a totally unsituated existence, though we are clearly arguing that globalization and the cosmopolitan perspective cultivate an existence that is not situated in *actual* places. Raymond Williams (1973), for instance, describes the world-city as uniquely placeless. It must be placeless to qualify as a world-city familiar to everyone but actually known by none. The model for the culture of the world-city, a model culture that has been ironically propagated worldwide, according to Williams, is the culture of high modernism (circa 1890 to 1920), which is a culture based on anonymity, isolation, "primitivism," elitism, and violence. Cultural moguls in capitalist and public media (those public media sponsors whom Williams calls "the godfathers") have parlayed the culture of the lost generation (young people embittered and uprooted by World War I) into the very model of a modern, major, general culture (Williams, 1989).

Meanings of the Rural Lifeworld

The rural lifeworld may be so situated as always to present an antithesis to cosmopolitan culture. The parameters of this lifeworld entail a "sensibility of place": the struggle to do good work locally; physical and emotional proximity to relatives; accessibility to neighbors; care for and struggle with the natural world; and love of home. This antithesis to the cosmopolitan lifeworld is described eloquently and in detail by such writers as Wendell Berry (e.g., Berry, 1978/1990; 1990), Gene Logsdon (e.g., Logsdon, 1993), and Wes Jackson (1996). David Orr (1995), the renowned environmentalist, argues that "re-ruralizing" education is necessary both to help preserve the natural world and to prepare rising generations to deal better with the otherwise

inevitable dislocations.[1]

To contrast cosmopolitan and local rural commitments as they apply to schooling, we provide two lists (adapted from Howley, 1997). First we give cosmopolitan concerns as they apply to rural schooling. All are instrumental and all should be prefaced with the phrase "how to...":

- o increase the level of students' aspirations,
- o overcome resistance to consolidation and school closure,
- o overcome the disadvantages of students' backgrounds,
- o implement state and national reforms,
- o offer a broad and deep high school curriculum,
- o insulate the school from local politics,
- o implement "best practice" (i.e., nationally validated methods and programs), and
- o (perhaps most ambitiously) change the local culture.

Corresponding commitments that characterize the rural lifeworld of schooling might include the following:

- o senses of and attachment to rural places,
- o the relationship between school and community sustainability,

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[1]A practical guide to this literature by Paul Nachtigal and Toni Haas, *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education*, was published in 1998 by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Discussion of this literature is organized thematically: education for living well ecologically, politically, economically, spiritually, and in community.

- proper aims for an education committed to rural community,
- pathways to rural adulthoods,
- community engagement in rural schools,
- rural community and educational stewardship,
- curricula to sustain rural places,
- small-scale organization in rural schooling and community, and
- cultivation of appropriate and just local meanings, knowledge, and commitments.

These lists, as noted, have appeared elsewhere. I do not want to carve them in stone, but they continue to serve as an illustration of the divide that separates cosmopolitanism from localism. A related contrast is the one between "globalization" and "localization" (cf. World Bank, 1999). These two constructs are seen by McMichael (1996) as mutually dependent; that is, globalization spawns increased localization--ironically, as one might say; or in manifest contradiction as others of us would claim. Globalization and localization did not of course, issue from an air duct. Rural and urban make one another, as Williams (1973) shows (via the history of English literature). The interesting thing about the newer constructs, however, is that institutions of global capital (e.g., the World Bank) regard the class struggle as over, fini, kaput. They see localization primarily as decentralization, a prospective wife for the husband, globalization. Others understand the contest quite differently and hope for effective opposition to the depredations of globalization. Habermas would seem to belong to this camp, as are many others (e.g., Heilbroner, 1993; McMichael, 1996; Sassen, 1996).

What is Properly Rural

Practical definitions of the locations of rural places abound. Most scholars doubt if any of these definitions "properly" define ruralness. Most are in fact based on a notion of ruralness as the absence of metropolitan standing.

Thus the idea of what is properly rural probably cannot be answered with a simple, or even a complex, definition, approaches. We have heard two characterizations, however, that make sense to us. "If you think you're rural, you are" and "Rural is someplace where one person can make a difference."[2] Both of these aphorisms, however, lean toward the demographic sensibility since both center on individuals. However, each in its way pays homage to a gestalt (a sense of the wholeness of the rural sensibility) that is represented in the many rural works to which Nachtigal and Haas (1998) pay homage.

We, however, have a personal view of the matter. Many readers will not be persuaded by it, and we do not insist that our view is best. It is, however, the ground of our experience and commitment. We distinguish between wilderness, industrial outposts, and "properly rural" places--where we understand "place" as composed equally of commitment, community, and an inhabited local terrain, and not just a political jurisdiction.

The latter view--the political jurisdiction, a.k.a. "mere dirt"--is the enabler of the demographic version of ruralness. To call wilderness "rural" seems to us an oxymoron. Rural is a populated countryside. Industrial outposts--mining districts located within the countryside--are also dubiously rural. Their traditions and purposes sustain the very machinery that threatens the

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[2]The first offering is anonymous, but repeated by many of us who live in rural areas. The second is how the rural sociologist Daryl Hobbs likes to put it (Vicki Hobbs, personal communication, June 1999).

rural lifeworld. People who live there are not, of course, to blame. Practically all of us carry out jobs that contribute to the global project of placelessness and deracination--certainly this is true of those who work in colleges, universities, most schools, and related enterprises.

So what is "properly" rural? For us, farming is properly rural. Not all farming, though, is properly rural. Large-scale agriculture and corporate agriculture resemble mining outposts. So do timbering and fishing outposts run in similar ways. None is sustainably rural, and none can sustain a properly rural lifeworld. The properly rural, then, is much less a question of delineations in the here-and-now, but is a question of imagination. What we imagine is rural communities that thrive by growing and caring for plants and animals in a sustainable plan that maximizes the common good on local ground, and not as a distant abstraction. In truth, imagination of this sort could encompass mining, timbering, and fishing enterprises that *would* sustain rural community.

An example of appropriately rural technology, and its concomitantly appropriate social organization, appears in *Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the World* (Weisman, 1998). Gaviotas (which means "seagull," named for a local gull that thrives, in fact, far from any ocean) was intentionally founded in the *llanos* (or plains) of eastern Colombia. It was originally an incubator for appropriate technology, but began to attract, and employ, local *llaneros*, both indigenous people and others. The mastermind of Gaviotas funded it all with grants initially, but over time, and haltingly, the community developed sustainable local businesses founded on appropriate technology. An interesting debate in this community (as reported by Weisman) was whether children should be educated for Colombian universities or to serve the local community. Weisman does not tell us how or if this debate resolved itself, but the concept of exporting

children to the cosmopolis did not sit well with many community members. Locally educated, and locally rooted, children were part of what sustained the community and its enterprises.

Rethinking Rural Context

It turns out that context is circumstantial. Rural can serve *as* (mere) context only to the extent that it is relegated to that role rhetorically. Common sense appears to force that role, but that common sense is an artifact of a cosmopolitan profession in which negligence of the rural lifeworld is a requisite.

When understand the rural circumstance as the lifeworld(s) of rural people(s), what was context reveals itself as a focus of attention, as a center from which to view all else. As the center of attention, the rural lifeworld becomes the place in which economic, moral, and intellectual choices are made for or against the well being of that center, which is now the rural lifeworld.

One of us attended a workshop for teachers in a rural school recently. Better instruction in math and science was the topic. Part of the presentation included the viewing of a basically informative videotape about the Third International Mathematics and Science Study. The tape, produced by a national organization, sandwiched the good information in a dubious and ulterior ideology--what business needs from schools to sustain US global economic dominion in coming decades. A well-designed apparatus delivers that ideology, through from friends at Archer-Daniels-Midland, to national institutions, to SEAs, and directly out into rural communities and schools. Common sense tells us what constitutes their view of rural context.

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